



# Crimes of Solidarity in Mobility: Alternative Views on Migrant Smuggling

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In this volume of *The ANNALS*, we present a collection of empirically based research projects on migrant smuggling, seeking to create a more nuanced understanding of the topic that supersedes perspectives that are often found in mainstream narratives of unscrupulous and ruthless criminal gangs preying on vulnerable and desperate migrants. The contributing authors rely on field data to reveal the complex and often symbiotic relationships between migrants and the people behind their journeys. Often misunderstood in juxtaposition to narratives of security and control, the lived experiences of migrants describe smuggling facilitators as relatives or close friends, acquaintances or distant operators—all members of a social network of varying relational proximity. Vulnerability in migration grows as the travel distance and transit points increase and the density of one’s own community ties decreases. The procurement of smuggling services is always situated within the collective wisdom and lived experiences of the migrants and their communities, and the strategies to increase the odds of success and to reduce the hazards and uncertainty of traversing foreign terrains.

*Keywords:* migrant smuggling; irregular migration; organized crime; evidence-based policy

**I**llegal immigration generated much hyperbole in the most recent presidential election in the United States and remains a hot topic in public discourse, often tied to vital national interests such as security and employment. In the United States, the conversation on illegal

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immigrants or immigration in general continues to polarize politicians as well as the populace, despite that illegal entries into the United States have declined considerably in the past decade,<sup>1</sup> having now reached levels seen in the 1970s.<sup>2</sup> The United States is not alone. Recent migration flows to Europe are portrayed as constituted by economic migrants and refugees from war-torn and economically deprived regions from North Africa to the Middle East and from sub-Saharan Africa to Southeast Asia who have flooded refugee camps and stretched thin government resources in many European countries. Media images and political rhetoric have been effective at stoking anti-immigrant sentiment and prompting voters to favor regimes that seek to impose strict nation-state borders and controls and xenophobic immigration policies.

## Illegal Migration and a “Crisis” in the (Western) World

The Western world has in recent years come under massive floods of migrants using unofficial channels (or illegal means) to enter their destination countries. By most government accounts, criminal gangs and illicit business networks are responsible for bringing these unfortunate migrants on precarious journeys and into risky circumstances replete with suffering and exploitation. Therefore, a dichotomous perspective has emerged in public discourse, dominated by government narratives on current irregular migration from the global South to the global North: (1) the brutality of the criminal smuggling networks and (2) the vulnerability of unfortunate migrants. For instance, according to Europol (2016), more than 1 million migrants reached European Union countries in 2015, and criminal networks as well as individual criminal entrepreneurs were responsible for assisting more than 90 percent of these migrants. These human smugglers “exploit the desperation and vulnerability of migrants” (Europol 2016, 1), while making off with enormous profits between 3 and 6 billion EUR. The United Nations, on the other hand, passed the Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and its supplementary protocols in 2000 that mandated all signatory member states (now numbering 184) to (1) combat the smuggling of migrants and (2) safeguard the rights of smuggled migrants.<sup>3</sup> The U.S. State Department (2017, 1) considers “people who are smuggled [to] be extremely vulnerable to human trafficking, abuse, and other crimes, as they are illegally present in the country of destination and often owe large debts to their smugglers.”

Western governments largely consider combatting and eradicating migrant smuggling an important, if not the most important, aspect in stopping or reducing the influx of illegal migrants. For instance, in February 2016, Europol launched the European Migrant Smuggling Center to “proactively support EU Member States in dismantling criminal networks involved in organizing migrant smuggling.”<sup>4</sup> The U.S.

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government practices the same response strategy—stepping up efforts to combat criminal smuggling organizations to reduce illegal entries by foreign nationals.<sup>5</sup> Along the same lines, major international organizations such as the United Nations also advocate positions that aim at improving legislative development and cooperation among member states to combat what is considered a multi-billion-dollar global criminal enterprise.<sup>6</sup>

The underlying logic for all these response strategies in the Western world seems remarkably similar—combatting smuggling organizations is key to reducing the influx of illegal immigrants. Such a belief and its concomitant policies are easy to translate into legislation and allocation of resources, against the backdrop of tragic images of capsized boats floating in the Mediterranean Sea, dead children washed ashore, and women and children in tattered clothes cramped in refugee camps in hopes of reaching Western countries. One such recent example is the San Antonio, Texas, tragedy of July 23, 2017, where ten migrants out of an estimated one hundred died after having travelled on the back of a truck with no refrigeration under the scorching summer sun; the act was labelled “sickening” and “demonstrating [of] kingpin smugglers’ blatant disregard for human life” (Beavers 2017). The magnitude of these tragedies obscures the reasons behind migrants’ use of smuggling services. Further, it reinforces the binary predator-victim position that saturates the official discourse on illegal migration and that has remained largely unchallenged in the West for decades: that migrant smugglers are major enablers to illegal transnational migration activities and the main cause of the human misery witnessed along migration routes worldwide. But is this the case?

## Questions That Demand Answers

Migrants seeking to enter countries without proper, official papers continue to solicit and procure services along the migrant trail from human smugglers, despite the vilification of the latter in news media, law enforcement, and policy circles. It may also appear as if the demand for migrant smuggling services rises as Western countries continue to fortify their borders. The persistent demand for smuggling services in global irregular migration begs the question of why migrants fail to heed the warnings of government agencies around the world and continue to hire smugglers. Why do people continue to seek out smugglers, seemingly oblivious of the dangers awaiting them? Why do so many migrants continue to place their lives and nontrivial amounts of money into the hands of criminals? Are we missing something when we stick to a binary predator-victim perspective?

As with all forms of illicit enterprises, the rise of migrant smuggling requires a market environment where mutual vetting by buyers and sellers takes place, and sufficient trust must exist, at least superficially, before a transaction can occur. The binary predator-victim perspective rarely applies in a context where both migrants and smugglers actively engage in negotiating, vetting, and trading.

Researchers have found similar patterns in which smuggling merely presents an opportunity to sell or exchange one's resources (see Zhang 2007, 2008; Chin 1999; and Sanchez 2014). Even the roles of smugglers are often fluid, with migrants often taking the role of smuggling facilitators and vice versa, as Achilli, Gonzalez, Stone-Cadena, and Velasco describe in their contributions to this volume.

What then are the major considerations that influence migrants' decision to hire a smuggler? Since none of the transactions in this illicit market is legally enforceable, what insurance mechanism is available for migrants to ensure that the services will be delivered and for smugglers to get paid? As Kook, Sanchez, and Zhang argue in this volume, migrants are not passive actors in the process of transnational migration but active in vetting and procuring smuggling services, evaluating the reliability of smuggling facilitators, and learning through failed journeys which smugglers are worthy of trust and why. Based on their fieldwork, authors in this volume of *The ANNALS* present migrant smuggling as a complex and layered social process where kinship, friends and associates, overseas migrant communities, personal connections, money, and prior experiences coalesce to form the basis for protection, safety, and decision-making along the migration route (Maher, this volume).

## Exploring Migrant Smuggling in the Field

At the onset of this project, authors were asked to explain why smugglers figure so prominently in transnational irregular migration narratives and draw so much attention from affected governments. Together these contributions set out to explore, in their respective corners of the world, not just the role and activities of smuggling facilitators, but their social lives. Our collective goal was to get as close as possible to the sources of the smuggling businesses and activities, and to collect data directly from the men and women who rely on smuggling as their livelihood. This goal emerged from our collective concern that existing literature on irregular migration has primarily drawn from the perspectives of government or law enforcement eager to contain migratory flows, or from migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers who are the unfortunate target of threats, scams, or violence during their clandestine journeys. The graphic images of migrant smuggling in the global news media also prevent views that contextualize smuggling amid the increasingly punitive migration regimes and the criminalization of migration. Irregular migration and its facilitation have long been viewed as a process deeply tied to the identities and livelihoods of entire communities, as Brachet, Stone-Cadena, and Velasco describe in the cases of the Sahara and indigenous Ecuador in this volume. Current public discourse that focuses on violence and exploitation has systematically silenced the insights of the vast majority of irregular migrants who successfully completed their journeys and the voices of those who played a role in that success, as Ayalew, Sanchez, and Zhang describe in their research in

this volume on migrants travelling through the Horn of Africa into Libya and the U.S.-Mexico migration corridor.

Despite the current hypervisibility of irregular migration and condemnation of smugglers as its main enabler, empirical work on human smuggling and its facilitators has remained scant. By developing this special issue, we intend to energize a rather static field of study on irregular migration and provide an empirical challenge to the fragmented, often one-sided perspectives on the migratory journey, focusing instead on its sociocultural dynamics, the smuggling facilitator-traveler relationship, and its community dimensions, as described, for example, by Majidi in the experience of Afghan and Somali migrants.

Our field data suggest that most smuggling facilitators do not engage in violent acts, as most are subject to the control or influence of moral and social obligations toward the families and communities of those who rely on their services. Maher discusses this in the context of Senegal in this volume, and Achilli does so about Syrian refugees, smugglers, and the refugees who opt to become smugglers.

A main goal of this collective body of work is to raise a much larger question about the role of border control regimes prevalent in the global North in shaping transnational migrant smuggling practices. In other words, we seek to understand what and how individual as well as collective strategies toward mobility adapt and adjust under the increasing militarization of border control. As Spener (2009) argues, human migration from open to clandestine and from legal to illicit is not a mere reflection of migrants' preferences in travel but rather the manifestation of the obstacles created by border enforcement. The procurement of smuggling services is in this sense deeply intertwined with the implementation of border control regimes world over. As Brachet describes in this volume, migrant smuggling is manufactured not by criminal enterprises or obscure mafia organizations but by governments themselves. To echo the work of Spener, irregular migration is a form of resistance by people seeking to improve their life or to escape wars and conflicts, a universal desire that is often reserved for the privileged few in a world increasingly impacted by an economic apartheid.

Last, this volume of *The ANNALS* is unique not only in the collection and analysis of firsthand data on migrants' experiences in smuggling but also in the inclusion of the views of migrant smugglers themselves, to challenge the dominant narratives in public discourse (Sanchez 2014). In a time when open source and big data analysis are increasingly used to explain security-related phenomena, a distinctive element of this entire collection is its reliance on firsthand empirical data, collected by the authors themselves through extensive in-depth interviews and field observations along major migratory routes around the world. All contributors have spent considerable time in the field gathering data that have compelled them to rethink and reframe the very concept of smuggling, its actors, and its implications amid contemporary global migration control regimes. The richness of the empirical data included in this volume has given rise to unconventional perspectives, which contrast sharply with the dominant narrative of the migration control regime and policy discourse. Rarely do established researchers venture into restive regions and treacherous fields to talk to strangers and collect firsthand data. We hope this volume charts a new direction in

research on irregular migration and that its contributions serve as an example of what fieldwork can do to challenge the status quo and counter dominant narratives.

## The Purpose of This Volume

This volume of *The ANNALS* comes at a critical time in migration studies, given the current crisis on refugee and migrant protection systems worldwide. Compared to the abundance of research on the lives of migrants and refugees, empirical work on their journeys remains scant. Academics, law enforcement, and policy-makers are sorely in need of empirically based work about this much-maligned aspect of transnational migration. Our collection seeks to address this gap.

Empirical work and edited volumes or special issues on smuggling have been difficult to compile and find in existing literature. Kyle and Koslowski edited *Global Human Smuggling* in 2001 and a revised edition in 2013, both volumes standing as fundamental texts in smuggling scholarship, yet their geographical focus was the U.S.-Mexico border, and on China. While the second edition expanded to other regions, the majority of the articles continued to draw from secondary sources, or relied on government reports and archival records. In 2016, *Geopolitics* dedicated a special issue to clandestine migration journeys, coordinated by Mainwaring and Brigden, which addressed the myriad ways in which migrants engage with the geographies they cover in the context of their journeys. Their special issue sought to analyze how “geopolitics shape and animate the everyday experiences of clandestine migration journeys” and the ways migrants “negotiate and manoeuvre” their journeys from their marginalized positions (Mainwaring and Brigden 2016, 244).

This special issue focuses on the actual organization of the irregular journeys, and on the persona of the facilitator—not as members of transnational organized crime—but as guides, drivers, brokers, cooks, recruiters, and lookouts, the men and women behind migrants’ journeys. We seek to establish smuggling first as a grounded social and cultural practice, while critically reframing its importance amid global border and immigration enforcement and controls. We hope our readers will find the articles in this volume different from much of the existing literature to date on political science or border criminology, which has focused on the experiences of migrants and their criminalization by the state. We are in no way minimizing the impact of border controls on migrants’ lives nor condoning exploitative smuggling practices. Rather, we use this platform rich in ethnographic data from multiple locales around the world to question the utility of the dominant discourse on migrant smuggling, to challenge its concomitant policy ramifications, and to identify its intersections with criminal justice and migration controls. We present a series of empirically supported perspectives that portray human smuggling as a social process engaged in by irregular migrants who seek to mitigate the uncertainty and hazards inherent in their illicit journey and, in the

process, build mechanisms of security from below (Ayalew, this volume). As our concluding piece from Triandafyllidou states, there is a need to dig deeper into realities on the ground, not least through qualitative empirical research and through comparative analysis, to understand the relationship between migrant smuggling and migration control policies. For policy-makers, we offer, unapologetically, a reality check against the rationale underlying the control regimes, and point out the culpability of current antitrafficking strategies in giving rise to criminal networks while causing human miseries along the smuggling routes. We seek to promote humanitarianism in our understanding of migrants aspiring to reach the global North, and to argue for the decriminalization of irregular migration and adoption of a harm-reduction approach toward undocumented migrants.

## Diverse Voices from around the World

In this volume of *The ANNALS*, we have included eleven articles documenting smuggling practices in the Americas, Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and the Pacific. These articles were first presented at an international workshop on smuggling facilitation held at the European University Institute (EUI) in Florence, Italy, in April 2016 and organized by the Migration Policy Centre (EUI) and the University of Texas at El Paso. The contributions come from both sides of the Atlantic and beyond, and involve smuggling practices in Afghanistan, Senegal, Ecuador, Syria, Niger, Turkey, Pakistan, Ethiopia, Somalia, Korea, the Sahara, Central America, and Mexico, in addition to the more commonly analyzed U.S. and European contexts. These articles fall into three specific areas: (1) the political and moral economy of irregular migration facilitation, (2) the community understandings of and interactions with smuggling facilitators, and (3) the role and agency of migrants and refugees along their smuggling journeys.

While a complex and multilayered topic such as smuggling lends itself to qualitative research methods, we have also included conventional survey methods to illustrate efforts by researchers to systematically evaluate migrant-smuggler interactions. In this volume of *The ANNALS*, Slack and Martinez examine recent migrants' experiences with *coyotes* (i.e., human smugglers) along the U.S.-Mexico border, by drawing on data gathered through the Migrant Border Crossing Survey (MBCS). Using this unique dataset, consisting of more than one thousand postdeportation surveys, Slack and Martinez focus on migrants' satisfaction with the services that they were provided by their most recent smuggler, as well as whether they would be willing to put family or friends in contact with that person. No study to date has evaluated the qualities that migrants expect and desire in human smugglers. Slack and Martinez's quantitative findings are an ideal supplement to the qualitative portion of this collection, which, as a whole, points to the vast, complex set of perceptions that shape migrants' decision-making regarding their journeys and, in turn, their ability to exercise their agency from the margins.

## Conclusion

In this volume of *The ANNALS*, we explore how human smuggling has evolved at the macro-level, amid the militarization, criminalization, and immigration controls of late modernity, as a practice historically grounded in solidarity and reciprocity among diasporas. At the same time, we also explore how smugglers and their clients adapt and develop specific strategies at the micro-level that are reflective of migrant communities and their collective traditions. The rich qualitative data in this special volume bring forth, to the broader society and nonacademic audiences, a perspective on smuggling's enterprising agents and their so-called criminal networks that is far more nuanced and easily accessible than the status quo offered by government reports and the news media. This special volume offers a rare but evidence-based portrayal of smuggling facilitators as otherwise ordinary citizens whose underground travel services are actively courted by people like themselves as an insurance policy or a protection scheme to reduce the uncertainty and hazards inherent in clandestine border crossings.

All authors of this volume identify the increased difficulties of border crossing as the primary force that is pushing migrants into the arms of enterprising agents. As border control regimes strain to erect migration barriers, people aspiring for mobility will continue to rely on their communities and kinship networks to find ways to migrate. It is therefore imperative to have a baseline from which to begin mapping the likely transformations of the smuggling industry, as recent geopolitical developments indicate the legal access to desired destinations will remain the purview of a privileged few (Gallagher 2015).

The empirical findings presented here run counter to the dominant narrative permeated in public discourse, which begs the question of why such a wide gap in conclusions exists between field research and the official position held by Western governments and their supported international organizations. We fully acknowledge the extensive evidence of abusive and exploitative smuggling practices, but identify their root causes in border and migration enforcement and control practices. We denounce the human cost of clandestine journeys, as reflected by the thousands of migrants who go missing or perish during their journeys.

Most authors in this volume come from or have resided in communities impacted by smuggling-related violence and witnessed its effect on migrants and ordinary citizens alike. It is in fact this awareness that has led us to problematize the simplistic predator-victim binary and to offer different views from the ground. We find the accounts of organized crime, mafias, and unlimited profits to be ineffective portrayals of the lived experiences of migrants and those behind their transits. We further consider the predator-victim binary used to designate the smuggler-migrant relationship a narrow portrayal of complex cooperation and mutually beneficial interactions. Because both smuggling facilitators and migrants are often members of the same social networks (e.g., relatives, friends, associates, or social acquaintances), they are subjected to the same informal control processes and therefore tend to engage in exchanges in ways similar to other social

enterprises. Smuggling facilitators may break away from commonly accepted social mores and codes of conduct for profit and self-preservation, especially in the face of hostile social settings. Some may abandon their clients in the deserts or charge ransom-like fees. Yet the majority of their operations run uneventfully, with little fanfare.

We present this collection of articles not only to challenge the dominant narrative but also to make readers aware of the voices from the margins, scant in mainstream discourse yet abundantly supported by empirical evidence. At the minimum, we hope to start a discussion that questions the mainstream narrative of smuggling and forces policy-makers to confront the real causes of irregular migration. Together we hope to build an evidenced-based foundation for the development of rational and realistic, as opposed to knee-jerk, response strategies and national policies on irregular migration that focus on harm reduction while protecting the dignity of those swept up in migration flows worldwide.

## Notes

1. According to the Pew Research Center (Krogstad, Passell, and Cohn 2017), illegal entries into the United States have been on the decline; non-Mexicans now outnumber Mexicans in border arrests; the majority of undocumented Mexicans living in the United States are long-term residents, which suggests fewer new arrivals.

2. Based on official statistics from the U.S. Border Patrol, arrests at U.S. borders have declined significantly from the height of more than 1.67 million to roughly 416,000 in 2016. Annual U.S. border apprehension statistics can be found at: <https://www.cbp.gov>.

3. The UN convention can be found at [https://www.unodc.org/documents/human-trafficking/Migrant\\_Smuggling/09-81206\\_English\\_eBook.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/human-trafficking/Migrant_Smuggling/09-81206_English_eBook.pdf).

4. Detailed information about this center can be found at [https://www.europol.europa.eu/content/EMSC\\_launch](https://www.europol.europa.eu/content/EMSC_launch).

5. The lead federal agency in charge of combatting migrant smuggling is the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) under the Homeland Security. For details of the U.S. official counter-smuggling strategies, see <https://www.ice.gov/human-smuggling>.

6. An example of the official assessment and counter measures advocated by the United Nations Office on Drug and Crime (UNODC) can be found at: <https://www.unodc.org/toc/en/crimes/migrant-smuggling.html>.

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